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Supporting the wellbeing of science teachers: Developing a wellbeing session for trainee science teachers and an interview study of teachers' views on wellbeing support

Abstract

Recent reports indicate the increasingly poor state of teacher wellbeing that is contributing to teacher recruitment and retention challenges. Science teachers are more likely to leave the profession than colleagues in other subjects, hence supporting their wellbeing should be a priority. We describe two strands of our work: first, a novel approach to supporting the wellbeing of trainee secondary science teachers and, second, initial findings from a pilot study in which a range of teachers, including science teachers, were interviewed about their wellbeing and the support available to them. We conclude by discussing our aim to further develop science teacher focused wellbeing support.

The state of teacher wellbeing

'Wellbeing' is a phrase that is commonly used, but that can hold different meanings for each individual. Here, we define 'wellbeing' as the state in which individuals feel the psychological, social and physical resources they possess are adequate for meeting the perceived demands they face (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). It can be helpful to conceptualise this as a sense of balance: if the perceived demands of a situation outweigh an individual's perception of their resources for coping, there is an imbalance, which can negatively impact wellbeing. Teachers increasingly report that their jobs are threatening their wellbeing, causing them to leave or consider leaving the profession (ESP, 2018) and contributing to the shortfall in teachers that is particularly severe for science teachers — newly qualified science teachers are twenty per cent more likely to leave the profession within five years in comparison with their peers in other subjects (Allen & Sims, 2017). Consequently, schools are beginning to respond to the poor state of teacher wellbeing by providing activities to support their wellbeing.

Our work has two strands: first we have introduced wellbeing support for the trainee science teachers on our PGCE programme at King's College London, second, we have carried out a wider pilot study that explores the wellbeing support offered to teachers, including science teachers, in primary and secondary schools in London.

Developing approaches to support science trainee teacher wellbeing

Our experiences have led us to recognise that the most common reason for trainees to struggle to complete our PGCE course is poor wellbeing. We have supported dedicated and hardworking trainees whose high levels of stress have affected their ability to participate in teacher training. Aspects of the science teacher role, including the management of practical activities and a common requirement to teach material outside of their specialism (Halim, Samsudin, Meerah, & Osman, 2006; Okebukola & Jegede, 1992), may make science teaching particularly stressful. Such experiences have prompted us to develop new approaches to supporting our science PGCE trainees' wellbeing. In the academic year 2018-2019, we introduced one compulsory and one voluntary session on wellbeing onto the PGCE programme. With the guidance of a counselling psychologist on our team, we developed a three-hour session that was held in February 2019, between the trainees' first and second school placements. The session was based on the idea that people's wellbeing suffers when they cannot realise values that are important to them. Trainees were given a set of 70 values cards (Miller, C'de Baca, Matthews, & Wilbourne, 2003) listing words such as authority, family, peaceful and friendship and were asked to choose their top ten most important values. They were asked to consider if and how those values had been realised in their first school

placement. Many trainees reported that the values that were important to them were absent or mismatched with those of their placement schools. For example, a number of trainees spoke of flexibility as an important value, but encountered rigid and inflexible school structures and practices on their placement. Such observations led to a discussion of how trainees could strive to better realise their values in their second placements.

In the second activity, the trainees drew line graphs representing peaks and troughs in their wellbeing during a typical week in their first placement. They discussed the causes of low points on the graph, including the absence of their core values, and considered strategies that could be used to support their wellbeing, by realising those values, at the low points. The final activity asked trainees to write, on Post-it notes, the strategies that they used to support their wellbeing, these included suggestions such as doing a breathing exercise after a difficult lesson and engaging in joyful activities like singing or going for a walk. The Post-it notes were stuck up in the teaching room, creating a self-help wall, and the trainees shared their experiences of using the strategies. Again, connections were made between the strategies and their core values, enabling others to see why the strategy might work for them.

Feedback on the wellbeing session was overwhelmingly positive. Consequently, we aim to develop the content of our wellbeing session and have been asked to deliver the material to trainees on other PGCE programmes.

The teacher wellbeing pilot study

In parallel to our work with trainee science teachers, we have carried out an exploratory pilot study to investigate the wellbeing support available to practising teachers in school. This study grew out of a critique of what has been referred to as the ‘wellbeing agenda’, a policy movement which recommends interventions to support the wellbeing of citizens with the aim of fostering productivity. In the context of school and teacher wellbeing, the wellbeing agenda may have negative consequences. It can place the responsibility of supporting wellbeing on teachers themselves. This neglects to address those school structures and systems which undermine teacher wellbeing. In order to examine the wellbeing support on offer in schools, we carried out thirteen semi-structured interviews in schools in the Greater London area as part of an ongoing study. The schools in the sample were selected using purposeful sampling from the network of schools known to the researchers. The participants were four primary teachers (working in three schools) and nine secondary teachers (from five schools), including class teachers, senior leaders and wellbeing leads.

Preliminary findings

At this early stage of analysis, we have identified three major themes from the data. First, in commenting on the wellbeing support available in schools, the teachers were critical of approaches that sought only to reduce in-the-moment stress, such as Pilates and art classes. Whilst teachers were appreciative of efforts to support their wellbeing, such activities were perceived as focusing on the symptoms of stress rather than its causes and were, in some cases, seen as additional burdens. One primary school senior leader, aware that wellbeing support activities could be seen as patronising by his staff, argued that creating a school culture that consistently and explicitly valued teachers was likely to be more effective than isolated events.

Second, a troubling finding was the extent to which the teachers interviewed took on responsibility for their own stress. One veteran secondary teacher, with over fifty years of experience teaching science, described the loneliness of the role that arose from his

perception that wellbeing issues were his alone to deal with. Several of the teachers spoke about the rising expectations placed upon them by schools, parents and society. A Head of Science reported that the standards teachers and trainees are held to had increased significantly during his career.

Third, teachers reported that the culture and management of their schools played a significant role in supporting or threatening their wellbeing. The Head of Science argued that the relationship between teachers and managers was critical for supporting wellbeing and suggested that managers act as role models for how teachers should go about meeting the demands of their role. A primary teacher observed that managers act as a line of defence between teachers and the workload generated by policy initiatives. She described how her headteacher had the courage to ignore or adapt the implementation of policies in such a way that prioritised the wellbeing of their staff.

Further research and future directions

The poor state of teacher wellbeing is a significant threat to the recruitment and retention of teachers. The problem is particularly acute for science teachers and it is pleasing to see that some schools are responding to the problem by providing support for teacher wellbeing. However, the nature of this support often focuses on reducing teachers' feelings of in-the-moment stress without addressing systems that create stress. Whilst schools should be praised for attempting to support teacher wellbeing, these approaches should focus on creating long-term individual and systemic change. Schools and leadership teams have a responsibility to foster school cultures that encourage collegiality and collaboration that supports the wellbeing of staff.

From the perspective of the individual teacher, interventions such as the values activity carried out with our PGCE science trainees, can be supportive as they move beyond only reducing in-the-moment stress and encourage teachers to have agency, either by seeking to change their current role to realise their values - for example by prioritising pastoral or creative activities - or by finding a new school that more closely coheres with their values. The recently-published ASE Teacher SOS (2018) provides some practical guidance for teachers looking to find roles that are supportive of their wellbeing. In addition to such general approaches to supporting teacher wellbeing, we intend to develop approaches that address the specific pressures created by the science teacher role. For example, the management of practical activities may be an aspect of science teaching that causes stress for teachers due to the additional challenges of behaviour management during practical work and a heightened alertness to risk and the safety of students. We intend to develop activities that are tailored to the context of science teaching that help teachers maintain their wellbeing in the face of subject-specific stressors. We hope that such approaches will allow more science teachers to experience their careers as sources of meaning and satisfaction.

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